

Letitia Barbour Green Stevenson (1843-1913)

Letitia Barbour Green Stevenson was born in Allegheny City in Western Pennsylvania on January 8th, 1843. Her father was Reverend Lewis W. Green, a Presbyterian Minister, who was head of the Allegheny Theological Seminary at Allegheny, Pennsylvania at the time of her birth. Her mother was Mary Ann Peachy Fry.

Letitia descended from a line of famous and distinguished people. She was a direct decent from the family of George Washington on both sides. Her great-grandfather was James Speed, a captain in the Revolutionary War. Some other ancestors were Joseph Fry, a young man who fought in the Revolutionary War, and Dr. Thomas Walker, a close friend of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.¹

In 1855 Letitia and her family moved to Kentucky and resided in Danville. Her father became president of Centre College. While her father was president of the college, Letitia met her future husband Adlai E. Stevenson I, who was a student at the school. Adlai was born in Christian County, Kentucky on October 23rd, 1835. He was the son of John T. and Eliza (Ewing) Stevenson. He attended both Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington and Centre College.²

Letitia endured “long and rigorous education” herself when she attended Walnut Hill Female Institute in Lexington, Kentucky, and then Miss Hayne’s Fashion School in New York City, where her sister Julia also attended school. She took “Ladies Curriculum,” which involved lessons in manners, sociability, and Latin. She was very well versed in the Classics and very well educated for a woman of her time.³

In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, Letitia hurried home to Danville from New York to find the entire town and college turned into military barracks and hospitals. During the course of the War, Danville was occupied by both the Union and Confederate armies since the town was located on the boundary between the two sides.

After Letitia’s father died on May 26, 1863 in Danville, KY she and her mother moved to live with Letitia’s sister, Mrs. Julia Scott, who was living in Chenoa, IL at the time.⁴ Her sister’s husband, Matthew Scott, was a wealthy and well known landowner in the area.⁵ While Letitia lived there, Adlai Stevenson I courted her for three years. Letitia, aged 23, and Adlai, aged 31, were married on December 20th, 1866 in the parlor of the Scott home in Chenoa. They moved to Metamora, Illinois, where Adlai served as a state district attorney until 1868. In 1869 the couple then moved to Bloomington because Adlai’s land speculations had soured due to population decrease in Metamora and also because he formed a new law partnership with his cousin, James S. Ewing. Adlai’s career as a lawyer would be one marked with success from here on out.

In Bloomington they first lived in a modest home at 308 South Albert Street, in an area known as Kentucky Hill.⁶ Later they lived in a “fine” house facing Franklin Park at 901 North McLean Street which was built in the Italianate style in 1869.⁷ It was originally built for William K. Dodson, a wholesale and retail dealer in foreign and domestic liquors. They lived there while

¹ *History of McLean County*, 1924, Vol. II, 930

² *McLean County History*, 1908, Vol. I, 507

³ Jean H. Baker. *The Stevensons: A Biography of an American Family*, 1996, 102

⁴ Le Roy J. Hasley D.D. *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Lewis Warner Green, D.D. with a Selection From His Sermons*. (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1871) 59

⁵ *History of McLean County*, 930-931

⁶ *Bloomington City Directory*, 1885, 364

⁷ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory*, 1902, 507

Adlai practiced law and also whenever they were not living in Washington where Adlai held different government positions such as a U.S. congressman, first assistant postmaster general and finally vice president of the United States.⁸

Letitia and Adlai had a loving and blessed marriage. They had four children. Their only son, Lewis Green, was born in 1868. They did not have another child for four years when in 1872, Mary Ewing was born. Two years later Julia Scott was born and finally in 1876, Letitia Green was born.⁹ Sadly, Mary Ewing died in 1895 from tuberculosis.

As a mother of four, Letitia took pride in her work as a mother and a wife. Regardless of her duties in public life, she never would neglect her home duties. She was a strong believer in the value of the home to the individual, to the family, and the nation.¹⁰ Regardless of her social status and upbringing, she performed the traditional women's duties in the home: washing, cooking, sewing, cleaning, and raising the children. She believed motherhood was a very important duty for women, and that with good motherhood there could be, "less need of jails, prisons, the industrial and reform schools."¹¹ Her cheerfulness and poise were always undisturbed.

Besides her views on motherhood, Letitia also took a firm stance on women's rights. She believed that women should go to college. This was not a popular view at the time because it went against what Harvard physiologist E.H. Clarke stated. According to Clarke, studying was harmful to motherhood because it drained blood away from the female reproductive organs, directing blood to the brain, making it difficult to produce children.¹² Letitia also supported women's rights to birth control. A mother's role in the family was so vital, she believed women should have the right to limit the amount of children they produced in order to sustain a more wholesome and stable family.¹³

The entire Stevenson family resided in Washington while Adlai held the office of vice-president beginning in the fall of 1892, under the presidency of Grover Cleveland. While Adlai was busy with his political responsibilities, Letitia was chosen as President General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR) on February 22nd, 1893.¹⁴ The DAR was formed on October 11, 1890 on the anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. Membership of the organization was restricted to those women whose ancestors had "rendered material aid to the cause of independence."¹⁵ The main goal of the NSDAR was "the promotion of education, especially the study of history and the enlightenment of our foreign population."¹⁶ She was elected for this position after the death of the first President General, Mrs. Caroline Harrison. Letitia held this position for two terms and then Mrs. John W. Foster took the position. In 1896 Letitia was elected for a third term, and in 1897 she served a fourth and final term making her the only President General to hold office for four terms. She retired in 1898 and was given the title of Honorary President General, which she

⁸ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory*, 1902, 931.

⁹ Jean H. Baker, 108

¹⁰ Henry McCormick, *The Women of Illinois*, 121

¹¹ Jean H. Baker, 159

¹² Jean H. Baker, 160

¹³ Jean H. Baker, 107

¹⁴ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory*, 1902, 931.

¹⁵ Jean H. Baker, 156

¹⁶ Jean H. Baker, 156

held until her death. Following her retirement, the Stevensons moved back from Washington to their home in Bloomington.

During her time as President General of the NSDAR, she was in charge of what was named the “formative period.” At this time they placed a monument in memory of George Washington in Paris along with a monument to the Ship Prison Martyrs in New York. They also raised money to purchase land near the White House where the Continental Hall would be built as the headquarters for the NSDAR. During her presidency, legislation for the State Flag Desecration Statutes began to take shape to protect the U.S. flag from commercial and political misuse. Letitia also was responsible for establishing the qualifications for membership which now rested on a lineal and not collateral line of descent. Lineal descent is a direct line from parent to child while collateral descent is more indirect and can go from cousin to cousin or uncle to nephew. Also during her presidency membership increased by 1,950 in 1893-94 and in 1894-98 increased by 3,488 members.¹⁷ After her retirement, she wrote a short history of the DAR.

Letitia also had many responsibilities as the wife of the Vice President of the United States. “Mrs. Stevenson occupied a position of social prominence in the nation’s capital which required womanly qualities of the highest type to acceptably and creditably.”¹⁸ She was expected to answer requests from the President’s wife. She also received many visitors and requests during her receptions numbering from 800 to 1000 requests. She especially enjoyed returning the calls from the wives of Senators and Supreme Court Justices. Letitia also filled in for the First Lady at any functions she could not attend such as dinners and luncheons.¹⁹ She was well liked by the cabinet members and their wives because of her “pleasing personality and her gracious manner and cultivated taste.”²⁰

Letitia was also very active at home in Bloomington as well. She organized a Bloomington chapter of the Army and Navy League and was its first president. She was the first president of the Bloomington’s Women’s Club formed in 1897, a position which she held for four years. Letitia was invited to become a board member of the National Association of Mothers which later became known as the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA). This group was developed to “encourage closer relations between home influence and school life.”²¹ She also was a long time member of Second Presbyterian Church and was active in the Home and Foreign Missions Society.

She was also chiefly responsible for organizing the Bloomington chapter of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, which formed on May 3rd, 1894 and still exists today. She called a meeting at her home with 18 women present. When the charter was secured, it was named after her. The Letitia Green Stevenson Chapter of the NSDAR was the fourth one founded in the state of Illinois and the seventy-ninth one founded in the U.S. In October of that year, an amendment was adopted by the NSDAR which stated that no chapter could be named after a living person. So the Bloomington Chapter was the only NSDAR chapter in the country at the time to be named after a living person.

¹⁷ *In Memoriam*, 15

¹⁸ *In Memoriam*, 4

¹⁹ Henry McCormick, *The Women of Illinois*, 115

²⁰ Henry McCormick, 114

²¹ Jean H. Baker, 158

Letitia died on December 15th, 1913 at the age of 70. Her husband Adlai died only six months later. After her death, her friends, family, and co-workers had many kind words about her. In an editorial in the *Daily Bulletin* on December 26th, 1913 it was stated that, “in the absence of Mrs. Stevenson we shall first mourn the wife, mother, neighbor and friend.”²² Letitia’s niece, Mrs. Julia Scott Vrooman, wrote a tribute in the National DAR magazine in January 1914. In short, it expressed that, “[Letitia’s death] will bring genuine grief to thousands of Daughters all over this country who had an abiding love and reverence for this strong and gracious spirit, whose life was a supreme embodiment of radiant, self-forgetful womanhood.”²³ Both Letitia and Adlai Stevenson I were buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington in the Stevenson family plot.

By: Lisa Dretske, 2009

²² *The Bulletin*, December 26, 1913

²³ *In Memoriam*, 12-13